

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific
knowledge, policies, or practices

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Thursday, June 13, 1935

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "OUR UNDERCOVER ENEMY -- THE TERMITE." Information from the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, United States Department of Agriculture.

--ooOoo--

Certain insects in this country have been getting so much publicity lately for their bad habits that many folks are beginning to feel uneasy about anything that crawls or flies. One insect that has been making the headlines regularly and getting a good deal of attention from many sources recently is the termite, the so-called "white ant." Its very mention gives home owners a scare -- home owners and property owners in general. And no wonder. The termite stories that are going around are enough to disturb anyone's peace of mind. For example, there's a story about a beautiful modern high school in a New Jersey town where the floor fell in with no warning at all. Termites had eaten it almost completely away -- eaten it so silently and skillfully from underneath that not a sign of what was going on appeared on the surface. The United States Treasury building in Washington, D. C., suffered a good deal of injury some years ago from termites that established themselves very thoroughly before they were discovered and caused some costly repairs. Then remember the story about that theatre building in New York which had every baseboard consumed by these silent undercover workers? Maybe you've heard, too, how termites feasted on both books and beams in a New York university and did very serious damage before anyone was aware of their presence. You may have heard similar stories of conditions which exist in other sections of the country. No wonder people are "termite-conscious" these days when they keep hearing such stories and when they hear also that termites annually accomplish a property damage of many million dollars and that nearly all sections of this country now have to contend with them.

Destructive as termites are, their bad habits have been exaggerated. Many terrifying rumors about them aren't backed by facts. So before you get the termite jitters, let me tell you what the men who have investigated termites for the United States Department of Agriculture have to say about them.

First, don't get the idea that termites may enter your home some night and have it practically demolished by morning, as some exaggerated reports would lead you to believe. These are tiny insects, you know, and though they're hard workers and said never to sleep, it takes time for them to do much damage. If you find evidences of termites in your house, don't get the idea that you must destroy them before the day is over or the house will collapse. You have plenty of time to call in a contractor or carpenter to make changes in the structure of the house that will keep termites out forever. Yes, and you also have plenty of time to write to the Department of Agriculture at Washington, D. C., for information on the best ways to deal with these pests. Sudden collapse of a building from termite work in this country is rare.

Then, many people have an idea that every insect that resembles an ant is likely to be one of these wood-eaters and house-wreckers. Other people, who have heard that termites look like ants and have wings, give their homes up for lost if they see any kind of a flying ant on the premises. Now, as a matter of fact, both these ideas are mistakes.

Mr. R. A. St. George, of the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, who identifies hundreds of specimens sent in by worried home owners, says that the termite isn't a real ant at all, even though it carries the name "white ant", and looks much like an ant, and lives in colonies as ants do. Actually it is more closely related to the roach family. Then, not all termites have wings anymore than all ants do. In a termite colony, you'll find several different sorts of individuals, some winged and some not. If you happen to see something that looks much like a black winged ant, Mr. St. George advises looking carefully first at the waistline and then at the wings to tell whether it is a destructive termite or a member of the ant family. You see, termites have very thick waists -- practically no waistline at all. And their long, greyish, transparent wings are about twice the length of their bodies. The winged ants, on the other hand, have slim waists, that look as if they were held together by a thread in the middle. As for their wings, they are only slightly longer than the body. The bodies of termites and of some of the ants are about the same size, however -- about 3/16 of an inch. Before you start worrying about any flying ant-like insect, have a look at its waist and wings. Unless it has a thick waist and wings twice as long as its body, it won't be a termite.

Anyway, the flying termites aren't the destructive members of the colony. They are only the parents of the worker termites who do the damage. The flying forms not only have wings but also eyes and are sexed. But the worker who undermines buildings is a different sort. His life is dedicated to perpetual slavery for his colony. He is the form responsible for that name "white ant," for he is creamy white in color. He is blind, wingless, and sexless, but equipped with a pair of mandibles for chewing wood. You rarely see this form because all his work is done silently and in darkness -- underground or under the surface of wood. This is why you often don't know he's around until floors and timbers begin to give way for no apparent reason. These worker termites build their homes, feed the colony, care for eggs and young -- in fact, do all the heavy work. And their diet is cellulose and water. The cellulose may be in the form of stumps, timber, houses, clothing, rugs, books, papers, and so on.

Well, fortunately for us, these ground-dwelling insects can't get along without water -- or moisture. That's the simple little but very important fact that enables us to control them. The men who have studied termites agree that the way to prevent them is to insulate all the wood in a building from the ground, to cut off their means of connection between the wood in the house and the soil which provides them with moisture. Whether you are building a new home, or protecting one already built, you can guard against termites by insulating all wood-work with some material like concrete, stone, or brick, or by one of the non-corrosive metal termite shields. Such insulation is a permanent protection to any building and even when its initial cost seems a little high, it will probably

pay for itself in the end. For temporary protection, you can poison the soil surrounding the supports of your house. Now if termites are already in the building, these same methods of control still hold good -- cut them off from their water supply in the ground and they will promptly die, or poison the infested soil under the house and they will be held in check for awhile at least. I won't go into the details of these control methods today. If you are interested you have only to write the U. S. Department of Agriculture at Washington, D. C., for complete information. Or, if you belong to a group that is interested-- a housewives club or a garden club or something like that, maybe a home bureau group, you can borrow or buy, at a very moderate cost, a film strip or a set of slides telling the termite story in pictures. This is prepared by the Extension Service of the Department of Agriculture.

#####

